

**Sermon for Trinity 16 (Proper 20); Year A (20.09.26)**

Texts: Philippians 1:21-end and *Matthew 20:1-16*

+ May I speak in the name of the living God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

During my studies at theological college one of the things that fascinated me most was church history. And one of the things I discovered was that just as it is in so many parts of modern life, from the tensions displayed in politics and government, to the ordering of church life, there were significant challenges.

Arguments in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century for example centred around things as diverse as agreeing on the very nature of God as Trinity, to the banning of kneeling in churches between Easter and Pentecost. An interesting argument as no one could actually agree on how to calculate the date of Easter in the first place.

But from time to time there were people whose service to the life of the church made a huge and lasting impact. And sometimes they weren't the people we might expect.

The year AD 306 was a significant year in the history of the Christian Church. It was the year that Constantine was proclaimed one of the rulers of the Roman Empire. He had joined his father, Constantius, whose army was stationed at York, and with him fought and defeated the Picts north of Hadrian's Wall. However, his father was ill and on his death, his soldiers proclaimed Constantine, Caesar.

Six years later Constantine returned to Rome with his army. But short of the city, he met a larger and stronger army at the Milvian Bridge. It was then that he reportedly saw a vision of the cross of Jesus, with the clear message "In this sign conquer". Constantine won the battle and, as a result, embraced the Christian faith.

He became the first Christian Roman Emperor, and during his tenure of office he brought about many reforms. He stopped the persecution of Christians and decreed that prisoners were no longer be kept in total darkness. He ended the famous gladiatorial fights to the death in the arena.

And in his desire to ensure the unity of the church he called several Councils of the Church and State, the most famous perhaps, the council of Nicea which agreed the statement of faith, the Nicene Creed, which we continue to proclaim today. And at the end of his life, and only then, was he baptised. Which brings me to today's Gospel.

Today we heard from Matthew, the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. And, like so many of the parables of Jesus, there is much more to this story than we might think.

Perhaps when we hear that the men who worked for just one hour received the same pay as those who worked in the vineyard for a full day, we are as shocked as they were. And we probably think that it seems very unfair.

Of course, the parable isn't about what constitutes fair pay or employment conditions. But to discover more about it I think we are helped by reflecting on the words "the last will be first, and the first will be last".

It's in fact the same answer that Jesus gave when Peter challenged him in the previous chapter of Matthew's gospel as he said, *"Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27).*

As with all the parables that describe God's kingdom Jesus was turning upside down the disciples understanding of what it meant to follow him.

At its most basic the main point of this parable is that we don't receive some kind of payment for serving Jesus in the same way that we receive wages when we have a job.

And our faith isn't like a contract with God where we can negotiate better terms for our hard work. Constantine the Great left it until he was on his deathbed before he was actually baptised. But he had been serving God for many years before it came to that.

St Ignatius, in the sixteenth century, made the same point in his prayer, when he asked only *"....to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will"*. Serving God and seeking his will for our lives is a very special calling for all Christians.

Before we leave today's gospel reading, I just want to think for a moment about those who were hired later during the day. At five o'clock the landowner went out into the marketplace, and he found others standing around idle. "Why?" he asked. "Because no one has hired us," they replied. They were surplus to requirements. Why did Jesus make such a point of these men in his parable? Perhaps it was because these were the very people he came to serve. The ones left behind by society. The ones nobody else wanted. The last will be first.

As we consider how we might apply this parable in our own lives, perhaps we should also consider those who are overlooked by society today. Those who are less fortunate, the homeless, those who feel they have nothing to contribute, the elderly, the disabled, those who don't feel they fit in, refugees or those of a different colour from us. These are "the last" in the world's concerns and we can probably each make our own list.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard asks all of us to bring the last to the front; and to help, in our own way, those the world considers the last into our first.

And what is our reward? It would be easy to simply suggest that doing good to others makes us feel good about ourselves.

But later in Matthew's gospel Jesus says that the hypocrites feel that way when they have the approval of other people. In the Kingdom of heaven, to serve others freely is its own reward, and none of us can completely know the surprising generosity of God's love and grace in our lives until we slow down and open our hearts to receive it.

AMEN